The Zen Practice of Nishitani Keiji

Horio Tsutomu

The profound influence of Buddhism on the thought of Nishitani Keiji is obvious to anyone who has studied his work—indeed, the appeal to absolute nothingness which forms the core of his philosophy is, in effect, an appeal to the Mahāyāna *śūnyatā* experience. Nishitani's understanding of this experience emerged not only through philosophical speculation but also—and perhaps primarily—through his many years of zazen (Zen meditation). The basics of Nishitani's Zen career, particularly his long practice at Shōkoku-ji monastery in Kyoto under Yamazaki Taikō (1875–1966), are familiar to most who knew him, but many of the significant details have remained buried in his writings or in the memories of close friends. Given the importance of Zen in Nishitani's development as a philosopher, I felt this an appropriate occasion to assemble some of this information and present a fuller picture of his practice.

Nishitani's Zen training began, for all intents and purposes, with his discipleship to Yamazaki Taikō in 1933 as a 33 year-old lecturer at Kyoto Imperial University,[1] but this was not in fact his first experience with Zen meditation. Sometime before he started zazen at Shōkoku-ji, he undertook the long train journey to Kamakura, where, with the help of a letter of introduction from D. T. Suzuki, he commenced study under Furukawa Gyōdō (1872–1961) at Engaku-ji monastery.[2] His stay lasted only one week, however, due apparently to the imminent confinement of his expectant wife. It is not clear precisely when this visit took place, though it could not have been much prior to the start of his practice at Shōkoku-ji. Judging by his description of the circumstances, it appears to have been in December, 1932, indicating that Nishitani commenced Zen study at the age of 32, several years later than his teacher Nishida Kitarō, who began at 27.

The inconvenience of the journey to Kamakura may have contributed to his

[1] This information was supplied by Kataoka Hitoshi, professor emeritus at Kyoto University and a fellow student with Nishitani of Nishida Kitarō. Though two years younger than Nishitani, he started Zen practice at Shōkoku-ji a decade earlier, in 1923.

[2] *Chokusetsu keiken—Nishitani Keiji/Yagi Seiichi.* ("Direct Experience—A dialogue between Nishitani Keiji and Yagi Seiichi"; abbreviated *CK*). Shunjū-sha, 1989, p. 60.

subsequent decision to continue his Zen studies at Shōkoku-ji in Kyoto.[3] Characteristically, Nishitani offers us few clues as to why he chose Shōkoku-ji from among the numerous Zen monasteries in the city (Nishida, for example, had practiced at Myōshin-ji). The fact that several of his friends had commenced meditation there several years earlier may have been the deciding factor.

It is tempting to speculate upon why Nishitani took up the practice of Zen, since his family—like that of Nishida—were adherents of the Shin Buddhist sect, the predominant faith in their native Ishikawa Prefecture. (Nishitani once mentioned to me that, as a young boy, he often heard family members reciting the Shin text *Hakkotsu no ofumi*[4]—"It made me depressed," he remarked.) An examination of Nishitani's autobiographical writings suggests that his interest in Zen developed in two separate stages. The first occurred during his youth, in what might be called the pre-philosophical stage; the second came after his philosophical studies, and thus might be termed the post-philosophical stage.

When Nishitani was six years old his family moved from Ishikawa Prefecture to Tokyo; eight years later his father died, leaving him and his mother in quite straitened circumstances. Nishitani reports, however, that poverty was the least of his difficulties.[5] Weakened by the same tuberculosis that had killed his father, Nishitani at seventeen failed the entrance examination for the Daiichi Kōtōgakkō (the precursor of the present Tokyo University), a setback he found particularly humiliating. Although successful the following year, Nishitani recalls that the period was nevertheless a despairing one for him.[6]

The writings of the Japanese novelist Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916) were of great comfort to him during this time, helping him accept the despair that so often marked his life. Natsume related this outlook to the Zen state of mind, inspiring the young Nishitani to study the writings of Zen.[7] One day in a Tokyo bookstore he came across the book *Thought and Experience*, by Nishida Kitarō.[8] Intrigued by the title, he bought the book. Thus began his en-

[3] Ibid.

[4] "The white bone epistle." A letter in praise of nembutsu practice written by Rennyo (1415–1499), eighth head of the Jōdo Shin Sect. The letter, written for a believer, is widely read by Shin adherents.

[5] *Watakushi no seishun jidai* ("My Early Years"; abbreviated as *WSJ*). *Nishitani Keiji chosaku shū* ("The Collected Works of Nishitani Keiji"; abbreviated as *NKCS*), Vol. XX, p. 176.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Waga shi Nishida Kitarō sensei o kataru ("My Teacher, Professor Nishida Kitarō"). *NKCS*, Vol. IX, p. 17. Also *Zen no tachiba* ("The Standpoint of Zen"), *NKCS*, Vol. XI, Introduction.

[8] Nishida Kitarō, *Shisaku to taiken* (1915).

counter with the thought of Nishida. The book's portrayal of a higher self far beyond the self of ordinary reality struck him like a divine revelation, he writes, and aroused in him the desire to study philosophy.[9]

The philosophical works of Nishida and Kant that he studied were far beyond his understanding, however, prompting further soul-searching as his graduation from the Daiichi Kōtōgakkō approached. Nishitani's class was on the elite track to the Tokyo Imperial University Faculty of Law and subsequent positions in the higher echelons of government, but this route seems to have held no interest for him.[10] He narrowed his choices to three possibilities: to continue with philosophy, become a Zen monk, or enter the utopian community Atarashiki Mura.[11] The fact that monkhood was included indicates the attraction this calling held for him even as a young man. This can be considered the pre-philosophic stage of his interest in Zen.

When the time came to decide, however, Nishitani chose the path of philosophy. Nishitani simply says, "One day, all of a sudden and for no particular reason, the decision was made." He writes:

> In my case the decision involved a resignation of sorts. Though I doubted my philosophical capabilities and was unsure that this path would provide me with even enough to eat, I nevertheless entrusted myself to it in the belief that there was no other way.[12]

After graduation, therefore, Nishitani did not accompany his classmates to Tokyo Imperial University but went instead to Kyoto and commenced his study of philosophy under Nishida Kitarō, devoting himself especially to German idealism and German mystical thought. He relates, though, that as his studies matured he suffered from a growing sense of separation from reality, as though philosophy allowed him to observe life but not to participate in it. He felt out of touch with the immediacy of existence, a feeling he likened to a sense of his feet not touching the ground, as though separated from the surface by a thin layer of cloth. Other images he used were that of a fly bumping against the unseen glass in a windowpane,[13] and that of a person looking out at a blizzard through a picture window, seeing but not feeling the snow and the cold. The blizzard observed through the invisible barrier of the window glass is in a sense quite real, but its reality differs qualitatively from the "*real* reality" of standing outside with the wind and the snow in one's face. This

[9] *Waga shi Nishida Kitarō sensei o kataru.*
[10] *CK*, p. 57.
[11] Founded by the man of letters Mushanokōji Saneatsu in 1918.
[12] *WSJ*, p. 184.
[13] *CK*, p. 57.

issue, the "realness of reality," became for Nishitani an increasing preoccupation, one addressed by philosophy but ultimately beyond its tools of logic and analysis. Nishitani became convinced of the need to set philosophical speculation aside for a time and simply meditate. "For me," Nishitani recalls, "the study of Western philosophy led to the practice of Zen."[14] This can be considered the "post-philosophical" stage of his interest.

This turn to Zen implied no final rejection of philosophy, however. The search that took Nishitani to Zen was one focused and clarified through philosophical study; although his post-philosophical question about the realness of reality can be seen as an extension of his pre-philosophical question regarding the meaning of life, it would not have matured to that point without the mediacy of philosophy. Philosophy enabled Nishitani to move from the question of life's meaning to the question of life itself, bringing him face-to-face with the reality attainable only through the transcendence of speculative thought. In setting aside philosophy for Zen, Nishitani was not rejecting the former but simply expressing his recognition of the qualitative difference between the two.[15]

In any event, meditation apparently answered some profound inner need: after a year or two of zazen at Shōkoku-ji, he reports, the "invisible barrier" between him and reality disappeared. No specific event precipitated this—no sudden Zen breakthrough, no clear-cut religious experience. "Strange to say," he says, "the feeling simply went away."[16]

This did not, however, mean the end of Nishitani's search—his heightened sense of "realness" neither provided life's meaning (the pre-philosophical question which had prompted his initial quest) nor revealed the true nature of existence (the issue to which his philosophical training had led him). Nishitani had at first believed that his newly found sense of immediacy was none other than the "direct experience" referred to by Nishida, but he later reconsidered: "I had, of course, read Professor Nishida"s *Zen no kenkyū*, so in a manner of speaking I knew what 'direct experience' referred to. Nevertheless, I hadn't *directly* understood the meaning of direct experience."[17]

[14] *Zen to gendai sekai* ("Zen and the Modern World") in *Zen to tetsugaku* ("Zen and Philosophy"). Kyoto: The Institute for Zen Studies, 1988, p. 29.

[15] When I began my own practice of zazen, Nishitani's recommendation was "Pursue philosophy as philosophy and Zen as Zen." This is said to have also been Nishida's advice to Nishitani, though if so it must have been made long after Nishitani commenced his practice—according to Kataoka, Nishida never informed even his closest disciples of his own Zen study till near the end of his life.

[16] *CK*, p. 60.

[17] Ibid.

During Nishitani's early years of Zen practice Shōkoku-ji was filled with young monks in training, leaving no room in the meditation hall for Nishitani and the other lay practicers to sit. They were therefore placed in the monastery's guest room, a circumstance that had its advantages: the guest room was located close to the central part of the temple, so that when the bell rang for *sanzen*—private interviews with the rōshi—the lay people were able to line up before the arrival of the monks from the meditation hall (one of the temple officers eventually put a stop to this by having them wait until the monks were in position). Nishitani seems to have attended *sanzen* primarily during *sesshin*, the week-long meditation retreats held in Zen monasteries at set periods during the year. On days when Nishitani arrived late after classes he would sit in the cooks' quarters; one of the former cooks still remembers how the professor's stomach used to rumble on those occasions, providing a bit of variety from the meditative silence.

Nishitani continued his practice under Yamazaki Taikō until 1957, interrupted only by a two year term of study in Germany from 1937 to 1939.[18] During this long-continued practice, the period when Nishitani was most deeply involved was from 1947 to 1952. It was a chaotic time, in which the population, spiritually exhausted from the first military defeat in Japan's history, was hard pressed to find enough to eat. Nishitani, as a representative of the Kyoto School (criticized by the occupation forces for supporting the Japanese wartime government), was banned from holding any public position, and was consequently left with little means of providing for his wife and five school-age children. He nevertheless continued his steady application to zazen, never showing the slightest irritation, never criticizing anyone or complaining about his circumstances. His friends, concerned for his welfare, could only look on in quiet admiration of the tranquil manner in which he sat zazen and comported himself at the monastery.

Nishitani engaged in Zen study for a total of 25 years, from the age of 32, when his visit to Kamakura took place, until the age of 57, when Yamazaki Taikō's declining strength put a halt to further *sanzen*. His training was not as intense as the daily *sanzen* of the Zen monk, of course—he received instruction only during *sesshin* six weeks a year, and even this slowed to a more leisurely once-a-week (and later once-a-month) pace following Yamazaki's retirement in 1944. Nevertheless, to have borne the constant tension of formal Zen instruction for nearly a quarter century is quite an unusual feat. It testifies not only to the support of a good teacher and good fellow practicers, but to Nishitani's own spiritual strength and resolve.

Strength and resolve alone would never have enabled him to continue,

[18] This information was provided by Kataoka.

however. To those who knew him the most remarkable thing about Nishitani's practice was its very lack of the extraordinary—it is precisely because Zen was such an ordinary part of his life that he was able to continue for so long. As his practice deepened over the years *sanzen* became the foundation of his everyday activities, so that in effect his true instruction continued not for 25 years but for his entire life.

Nishitani was given the *kojigō*[19] of *Keisei*—"Sound of the valley stream," from the opening words of an enlightenment poem by the Sung Dynasty poet Su Tung-p'o (1037–1101)—by Yamazaki in 1943, at the urging of his successor, Ōtsu Rekidō (1897–1976). The implications of this name can be judged from the final two lines of the poem: "The sound of the valley stream is the preaching of the Dharma; the form of the mountains is the Buddha's pure body."

In his final years Nishitani received formal recognition of his Zen understanding from Kajitani Sūnin, the present abbot of Shōkoku-ji monastery and one of those most familiar with Nishitani's Zen practice.

Layman Keisei Nishitani
Kajitani Sūnin Rōshi

The words of Nishitani Keiji were always simple, always to the point. Yet not a sound nor a phrase he uttered was out of accord with the principles of Zen. He was truly a man of the Way.

I once called the professor's unpretentious approach "Keisei's dead-tree Zen." By "dead-tree" I was not implying a lack of vitality. Nishitani was a man who, with the most considerate of words, addressed the flaws of our sect; a man whose selfless aspiration for truth impelled him even in great age to an untiring education of the young. How could one call such a man lacking in vitality? The term "dead tree" points not to lifelessness but to that pure state of oneness and simplicity in which all distracting thoughts have been swept away. This state—"nobility of spirit" is the best I can describe it—Nishitani attained through his long years of Zen practice.

[19] Literally, "layman's name": the special names which Zen teachers sometimes give to long-term lay practicers.